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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: COVERED REBELLION: HEADSCARVED URBANITES BREAK
BOUNDARIES MORE QUIETLY THAN AKP

REF: A. ISTANBUL 137

[¶](#)B. 07 ISTANBUL 1475

[¶](#)C. ANKARA 320

[¶](#)D. ANKARA 224

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A Wiener for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).
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[¶](#)11. (SBU) Summary. Following re-publication of selective portions of controversial survey data collected by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in a daily newspaper, we met with TESEV to discuss the contentious headscarf ban in universities. Continued conversation with TESEV officials, a conversation with members of youth NGO-affiliated Strong Turkey Party, and a conversation with Bilgi University Professor Murat Belge touched on divisions within Turkish society and described a new path forged by the younger generation of Turks, particularly by covered women in Istanbul. End summary.

TESEV Surveys, Radikal's Interpretation, Controversy All Around

[¶](#)12. (SBU) In February, respected daily newspaper Radikal re-published a relatively obscure portion of a 2004 Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) survey on women's participation in public life, trumpeting old statistics as a new revelation of why young women do not attend university. According to Radikal's article, nearly 30% of female respondents cited failure to pass the university entrance exam, while only 1% cited the headscarf ban. Radikal claimed the results proved the ban was not the major obstacle to women attending university in Turkey that some declare it to be.

[¶](#)13. (SBU) TESEV democratization officer Volkan Aytar and his assistant Ebru Ilhan directed attention to TESEV's 2006 survey "Religion, Society, and Politics in a Changing Turkey," which found that the percent of women wearing some type of head-covering decreased from 72.5% in 1999 to 61.3% in 2006, contradicting what many Turks "see with their own eyes" as an increase in the number of covered women. TESEV's challenge of the perception that there are more covered women proved volatile in the country's debate over ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)-proposed reforms to lift the headscarf ban in universities, seen by some as a serious threat to Ataturk-era policies.

What It Means to Be Modern

[¶](#)14. (C) Lifting the headscarf ban in universities has brought deep societal rifts to the surface in political and

intellectual circles, blurring the lines between progressives and reactionaries (ref C and D). Religious conservatives and the Islamic-oriented AKP stand opposed to the staunchly secular establishment, traditionally seen as bastions of westernization. According to Bilgi University Professor Murat Belge, a noted liberal intellectual, Turkish society is also divided along class lines, whose dynamics are changing. The popular AKP and rising power of a new "Islamic" or "Anatolian bourgeoisie" present an unprecedented challenge to the secular elite and the military in this 99% Muslim country, according to Ilhan and Belge. The AKP calls for reforms in the name of freedom, while the secularists call for resistance in the name of Ataturk. Both sides claim they stand for progress and modernity.

¶ 15. (C) Ebru Ilhan, who does not cover her head, said covered women in urban areas have increased their public presence, not their "sheer numbers." Young women today work, study, and go out to chic clubs, all while sporting the readily identifiable Islamic-style headscarf, the "tesettur" or "turban" in Turkish. The "turban" is more conservative than the kerchief-style head-covering worn by Turkish "mothers and grandmothers," which does not necessarily cover all hair. Secularists see the "turban" as a dangerous threat, symbolizing an invasion of political Islam from foreign fundamentalist regimes and a departure from traditional Turkish culture. Belge said this fear is "grossly exaggerated" by the secularists and bolstered by the Turkish military's self-defined role in Turkey as a secular watchdog, ever ready to intervene against religious encroachment in government.

¶ 16. (C) Leyla Erdogan (ref A), an uncovered university student and administrator in the NGO Young Leaders of

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Anatolia's (AGL) offshoot, the Strong Turkey Party (GTP), felt secular elites, deep-rooted stereotypes about covered women are at the heart of headscarf tensions. Secular elites prejudge covered women as uneducated, poor and backward. But Erdogan said covered women are increasingly educated, urban, and forward-thinking. She and the two GTP Deputy Chairmen told us this was demonstrated in early February when more than 900 women, including covered intellectuals and professionals, signed a petition circulated by young covered Turks for broad individual freedoms. It is now impossible to tell who someone is just by looking at their head, Erdogan said, they must look "inside their brain." Leyla Erdogan and Professor Belge both noted that friendships regularly transcend the "cloth divide"; in their view, tensions at universities are largely "artificial."

¶ 17. (C) Ebru Ilhan described the "turban" as the urban young woman's weapon of choice in a muted rebellion against demands of a society where both the secularists and pious feel women, the elderly, and disabled need paternalistic protection. The Turkish state, Belge told us, "may be a loving and caring parent," but it is a parent that does not believe the child (Turkish society) can grow and change. This new breed of urban young women, however, pairs trendy western styles - considered immodest by religious conservatives - with the "turban" - considered dangerous by secularists - to flaunt their individuality, defying both secular and religious conceptions of the "ideal Turk." Covering is no longer just a religious requirement for "good Muslim girls;" for many it has become a fashion statement.

Call for Reform Raises Awkward Questions

¶ 18. (C) The limit of authoritarian government in defense of Ataturk's 1920's vision for Turkey was once a taboo topic. Prior to the Chief Prosecutor's closure indictment for the AKP, Ebru Ilhan praised an unintended consequence of the headscarf debate, saying AKP-led challenges to Ataturk-era principles forced secular circles to debate the degree to

which compromise is possible. The structure of Turkey's elite is changing, Belge argued. More religious families have money - enough to move to the cities, to send their children to good universities, to run businesses and even to run the country. The AKP's strong victory in the 2007 elections was something that went against everyone's "expectations of what should be," he said. After decades of feeling oppressed by strictly secular elites, the new Islamic bourgeoisie is eager to make the most of their newfound power. And that means challenging some Kemalist interpretations of Ataturk's principles.

¶9. (C) The AKP has already triggered transformation, but not through top-down Islamification, as feared by secularists. While the AKP at the national level moderates religious positions, AKP-run municipalities enforce religiously-motivated laws, such as banning alcohol in large swaths of their cities (ref A). According to TESEV's Aytar, these popular AKP-run municipalities and NGOs also step in to fill social needs through religiously-motivated "helping out" activities, gaining the public's esteem in areas relatively untouched by secular elites or official state-sponsored programs and further strengthening AKP's electoral base (ref B).

¶10. (C) Aytar said a lingering Ottoman "group vs. state" mentality prevailing in Turkey means groups lack a vision of universal individual rights and thus demand rights exclusively for their own side, but not others, seeing rights as a zero-sum game. For the AKP and its supporters, this could mean lifting the ban is motivated by a feeling of "Muslim brotherhood" and desire to protect "their women," more than dedication to democratic principles, Volkan and Ilhan said. Belge told us, "The most difficult thing is to want democracy for the 'other'." That desire does not exist in Turkey.

The Next Foulard Front

¶11. (C) Even as the debate on the headscarf ban in universities grew increasingly contentious, another storm was brewing, one that would fly directly in the face of Ataturk's reforms. Before the Chief Prosecutor's closure case was lodged, renegade AKP members had hinted at the possibility of lifting the ban on headscarves for public servants. GTP members brought it up in a natural progression of the conversation. Despite being in the same organization, the

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three members disagreed on covered public servants' ability to perform their duties and the effect it would have on society. In the end, GTP Deputy Chairman Goksel Akman shrugged saying, "It is not over," to which his fellow deputy chairman morosely added, "It will never be over."

¶12. (C) Comment. In Turkey, the debate over the headscarf has been dominated by older male politicians, a demographic group far removed from female university students. But the key to forming a modern Turkey may not lie in the hands of politicians or the military, but with the younger generation of Turks. This generation is more educated, more broadly affluent, and more connected to both the Western world and the Middle East through modern technologies. Already, young Turks have defied some of the GOT's restrictions on freedom of expression in ways as public as staging demonstrations calling for reform of Article 301 and as private as using proxy servers to get around government bans on YouTube. As the conflicting demands of Turkish society's old-guard grow louder, the younger generation, exemplified by the new covered urban woman, finds its way around the snares. End comment.

WIENER